

An Ethnographic Study of Education and Status Among Muslim Women  
in Old City Hyderabad

Undergraduate Honors Research Thesis

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# Introduction

## Situating the Researcher

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Hyderabad, India from late June to mid-August 2014. This research project took place during my second visit to Hyderabad. I chose my research site to build on my previous experience in the city and the network of contacts I developed during my semester at the University of Hyderabad in spring 2013. During that semester, I participated in a study abroad program run by the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE) and enrolled in classes with other American students and Indian graduate students from various regions of India. I became interested in the challenges that Muslim women in the Old City faced during excursions into the city of Hyderabad, where women covered in black *burkas*<sup>1</sup> offset by colorful handbags shopped and chatted with friends. The dominant narrative that emerged from conversations with international students and upper middle class Hindus characterized Muslim women, particularly Muslim women who wore the burka in public, as an oppressed, helpless Other in comparison to “modernized” Hindu women living in universities or more upscale parts of the city. To deconstruct the narrative of the oppressed Other and understand the realities that Muslim women faced in their daily lives in the Old City, I decided to study access to education and the perceived effects of women’s education on gender equality in the community.

After my semester abroad, I contacted the academic director of CIEE at the University of Hyderabad and shared my plan to conduct research on women’s access to education in Hyderabad.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Middle East, this garment is known as *niqab*, but Hyderabadi women refer to it as burka. Therefore, when I mention burka, I refer to three-piece outergarment that covers the body, head, and lower face of a woman but leaves the eyes unobscured.

She put me in touch with staff members of the Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA), whom I began to correspond with via email. I met with a COVA staff member upon my arrival in Hyderabad and explained the goals of my research project, and he directed me to Noor Jahan Siddiqui,<sup>2</sup> a former COVA employee who left in 2012 to become a senior counselor at My Choices, an anti-domestic violence NGO.

After an initial meeting in late June 2014, Noor Jahan made arrangements for Ayesha, a Peacemaker (junior counselor) with My Choices, to serve as my interpreter and help me interview Urdu speakers. Ayesha was fluent in English due to her training with a nationwide education NGO that provides after-school tutoring to children in government-run schools. She had worked for the NGO for four years before leaving in 2012 to become a Peacemaker. With Ayesha's help, I interviewed 31 women about their home and family life, education, work, and perceptions of the limitations girls and women face as they try to access formal education. I interviewed thirteen informants in the My Choices office, where they were invited by Noor Jahan and Ayesha. I met additional informants while observing classes in local schools and shadowing social workers affiliated with My Choices and working in the Old City. Interviews were semi-structured and followed set questions regarding education level, family background, and employment history. I asked open-ended questions that allowed informants to share as much information as they wished and describe other aspects of their lives.

Noor Jahan and Ayesha invited me to observe classes at government schools and Islamic schools, or *madrassas*. During my research, I visited four government schools (including two preschools), a residential hostel, and two *madrassas*. I observed students in class and interviewed the teachers (who were all women) about their lives and work. A few informants invited me into

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<sup>2</sup> All other names have been changed. Noor Jahan Siddiqui is referenced by her name because she is a prominent public figure in the community and has been referenced by name in previous academic work (Lane 2011).

their homes. I also befriended a young woman, Fatima, whose family invited me to participate in Friday prayers with other Muslim women in Old City, *iftar*, which is the evening meal to break the fast during Ramadan, and the Muslim holiday Eid, among other activities. These experiences provided valuable insight into the beliefs and practices of Indian Muslims in Old City Hyderabad.

### **A Brief Social and Historical Overview of Hyderabad**

In this section, I contextualize my research and describe the social history of Hyderabad, India. In this manner, I provide background to understand the daily lives and challenges faced by Muslim women living in Old City Hyderabad. I also discuss the founding of the Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA) and My Choices, NGOs which played a significant role in the lives of many Hyderabad women.

The city of Hyderabad was founded in 1591 by Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, the fifth ruler of the Qutb Shahi dynasty in the Deccan Plateau during the sixteenth century. Qutb Shahi rulers maintained control of the area for almost a century before Hyderabad was incorporated into the Mughal Empire (one of the largest empires in Indian history.) As the Mughal Empire declined in size and influence following the rule of Aurangzeb (1658-1707), Mughal viceroy Asif Jah I declared the sovereignty of Hyderabad State in 1724 and established the rule of *Nizams*<sup>3</sup>, Muslim princes who controlled Hyderabad until 1952. The legacy of Muslim rule in the region

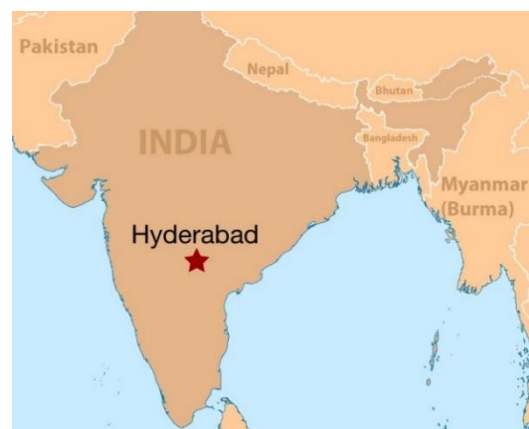


Figure 1: Map of Hyderabad from [mylifeinzion.com/tag/hyderabad](http://mylifeinzion.com/tag/hyderabad)

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<sup>3</sup> *Nizam* is a title that was conferred upon the princes of Hyderabad. The word *nizam* derives from the Arabic word *nithaam* which means “system” or “regime.”

lives on in present-day Hyderabad through Indo-Persian architecture, distinctive Hyderabadi cuisine, and perhaps most importantly, through the continued tension that exists between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority.

Census data from 2011, the last year that data are available, indicate that Hyderabad had a population of approximately 6.8 million people.<sup>4</sup> Approximately 540,000 people in the Greater Hyderabad area lived below the officially defined poverty line, and according to the *Hyderabad – City Development Plan* (2011), “the incidence of poverty among women is higher and female-headed households constitute the poorest of poor.”<sup>5</sup> The average literacy rate for Hyderabadi was 86.14 percent for males and 79.51 percent for females, and it varied among different areas of the city. Informal sector workers, including those who worked within the home for income, as well as those who worked as merchants and had no officially recognized employer, constituted approximately 30 percent of the city’s workforce. While statistics are not available for the Old City area of Hyderabad, informal work is prominent in that area. In the Old City, shopping centers consist of markets with small stalls run by individual vendors, unlike the proliferation of shopping malls and chain stores in other parts of the city. Many of the women I spoke with during my research were married to men who were “day laborers” in the informal sector. The men’s work could be infrequent and depended on their ability to sell fruits, clothes, bangles, trinkets, among other goods. A significant proportion of women in Old City (my interpreter estimated the number to be around 70 percent) worked as tailors or on crafts in their homes to sell to their neighbors to supplement their husbands’ earnings. Working outside the home remained relatively rare for women in Old City, according to the interviews I conducted. Of the 31 women I spoke with, eight

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<sup>4</sup> Hyderabad is a very fast-growing and fast-developing city. Informants reiterated that the city had grown and become more technologically advanced over the last ten years. One example is the current construction of a metro system to reduce traffic.

<sup>5</sup> The report did not indicate the value of the official poverty line in Hyderabad.

identified themselves as housewives or tailors who worked at home. However, this was not representative of the population; since I recruited informants through an NGO, I spoke with 21 women who were employed in social work, education, or health professions. Therefore, educated and employed women were over-represented in my research compared to the general population of the Old City. In the city of Hyderabad, “housewife” is a more common occupation for women than would be concluded from my sample.

Hyderabad’s history is marked by communal tension between the Hindu and Muslim communities. A tragic recent example of this was the bomb blasts on February 21, 2013 that killed 16 and injured at least 100 in a Hyderabad market (The Indian Express 2013). The police, media, and much of the city’s population blamed the Indian Mujahedeen, an Islamic extremist group, for the explosions. Communal violence in the city rarely takes the form of bomb blasts – more often, riots erupt over events that range from major international upsets (like conflict between Pakistan and India) to more localized events, such as a proposal to erect a Hindu shrine in a Muslim-dominated neighborhood. Conflicts erupted in Hyderabad during the early 1990s after communal riots spread across India in 1992 following the demolition of the Babri Masjid.<sup>6</sup> During these riots, Noor Jahan Siddiqui was working in the office of the district collector, and she advised local leaders to visit average people in the community to better understand the problem. Noor Jahan helped a neighbor by ensuring proper care and burial for the neighbor’s husband, who had been killed in the riots. Her work was formally recognized in 1994, when local activists formed the Confederation of Voluntary Associations (COVA). Noor Jahan joined them in COVA and worked

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<sup>6</sup> The destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque is one of the most well-known examples of Hindu-Muslim violence in India since Partition in 1947. In the 1980’s, Hindu nationalist parties gained prominence through a sustained effort to demolish the Babri Masjid, a mosque that was built by the first Mughal emperor Babur in 1527. Leaders of Hindu nationalist organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alleged that the mosque was built over the remains of Lord Rama’s birthplace, and they toured India encouraging Hindus to tear down the mosque and build a temple to Lord Rama to replace it. Approximately 150,000 of their followers destroyed the mosque on December 6, 1992, and communal riots between Hindus and Muslims broke out across India.



to build capacity for women's literacy, access to healthcare, and communal harmony. COVA's website states the links between poverty and communal violence in Old City:

The Old City of Hyderabad was amongst the worst affected of the urban agglomerations in India to face massive urban decay. There was acute lack of proper civic and municipal amenities such as regular water and power supply, proper roads, hospitals, schools, recreational facilities, open spaces etc.

In conjunction with such urban decay, there existed high levels of illiteracy, unemployment, very low incomes, and lack of training and skill development facilities. Amongst the hardest hit sections were children, youth and women. Women, traditionally, were not permitted to mingle freely in society, and majority of them were entirely dependent. Literacy rate, health care and economic opportunities for women were very low.

Poverty, backwardness, lack of awareness of the social and economic issues were being utilised by vested interests to divide the people of the area for narrow political gains, which resulted in frequent communal tensions and conflicts, often leading to violence and loss of life and property (COVA 2014).

Asghar Ali Engineer also found links between the relative material deprivation of Indian Muslims and the presence of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims (1985, 1995, 2004). He argued that when Hindus or Muslims step outside their own communities and attempt to compete

economically, political and religious leaders use religious difference as a justification for violence. While this phenomenon generally falls under the category of communal violence, shared communal rhetoric sometimes acts as a smokescreen for economic instability and fears of competition undermining the financial security of individuals or a group. Additionally, strong familial and religious ties compel more individuals to involve themselves in communal conflicts until they escalate out of control.

COVA staff and volunteers succeeded in limiting Hindu-Muslim violence and improving women's access to opportunities in the Old City. One of COVA's most widely publicized successes followed a national wave of communal violence in 2002. The violence began when a train in Gujarat caught fire, killing 58 Hindus.<sup>7</sup> In the confusion that followed, the exact facts of the incident were obscured by media reports of aggressive Muslim men raping Hindu women to



assert their dominance. Excited by such reports, Hindus throughout Gujarat conducted pogroms against their Muslim neighbors, and approximately 2,000 people were killed in the violence that ensued. Less than one month later, on March 15, 2002, communal tensions rose in

Hyderabad, and riots developed between Hindus and Muslims. Female COVA volunteers created a human chain around Charminar, a sixteenth-century monument that served as a potent symbol for Hyderabad's Muslim community. When a group of rioters in the Old City were confronted by

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<sup>7</sup> Thirty-one Muslim men were convicted in 2011 for arson of the train, although more than 60 others were arrested for and acquitted of the crime (Burke 2011).

the circle of women literally standing their ground against communal violence, they decided not to fight and instead returned to their homes (COVA 2014).

While communal violence is a significant topic unto itself and has been a topic of much discussion in literature regarding religious minorities in India (Brass 2003, Davis 1996, Froerer 2007), I touch upon it here to illustrate the complex and sometimes dangerous situations Hyderabadi Muslims face in their lives and to emphasize some of the challenges that confront women in the Old City. Noor Jahan, who was a key informant in my research, drew clear parallels between women's empowerment (including health and education) and communal harmony. When I asked about her work with COVA, Noor Jahan explained that she organized "mixed" (Hindu and Muslim) community meetings for women. She believed that "when women are empowered, the whole family will be empowered...Generally, women's problems are women's problems. Not Hindu, Muslim, same problem. Education problems same, knowledge problem, family violence problem, same for Hindu and Muslim" (Interview: July 2, 2014). She went on to describe social problems regarding girls' education, an issue I will return to in detail.

This brief review of Hyderabad's history and contemporary social environment provides context for the issues that women in Old City face regarding poverty, a conservative community, and lack of access to education. COVA is one example of an organization that is working for social change in multiple areas, including communal violence and women's empowerment through education.

## **My Choices**

In addition to COVA, a Hyderabad-based NGO that featured prominently in my fieldwork was My Choices, an anti-domestic violence organization founded in 2012 by New Zealander Elca Grobler. I was introduced to My Choices through COVA staff, who informed me that former COVA Noor Jahan had agreed to help me find informants for my research. Noor Jahan told me she had enjoyed her work with COVA, but her position with My Choices allowed her to spend more time on her passion: counseling families on interpersonal conflict and (hopefully) resolving the underlying issues. One of the main services provided by My Choices is counseling about domestic violence issues. As Ayesha said, “We work on domestic violence, different types of violence. Emotional, physical, economical, sexual also. Even maintenance [money that divorced men are expected to pay to their wives] also” (Interview: July 2, 2014). Junior counselors like Ayesha were referred to as “Peacemakers” and were tasked with bringing domestic violence cases to the NGO’s attention and overseeing school programs about girls’ safety and health. Noor Jahan and other senior counselors conducted intensive counseling work to resolve disputes through individual, couples, and family counseling sessions.

Because my main source of connections in the Old City was through My Choices, most of my informants were either employees or beneficiaries of the organization. The Peacemakers I interviewed were a diverse group of women. The youngest Peacemaker I interviewed was twenty years old, while others were in their forties or fifties. Some had completed a Master’s degree, while others had a basic tenth standard education. Many had never worked outside their homes before joining My Choices, and they spoke of their employment as a liberating experience. I further explore the relationships between Peacemakers, My Choices, and women in the Old City in a chapter on NGOs’ potential as a driver of social change. (For additional data regarding the

demographic makeup of informants, including age, marital status, and occupation, see Appendix A.)

### **Social and Legal Restrictions on Muslim Women in Hyderabad**

Divorce and the *pardah* system of sex segregation significantly affect relationships between men and women in conservative Muslim areas and are salient issues confronting Muslim women in Old City Hyderabad. Although the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights to all citizens, Supreme Court rulings have led to differing codes of personal law based on religion. The most widely known case was that of Shah Bano Begum, a Muslim woman whose husband divorced her in 1978. Shah Bano won the right to alimony from her husband in a case that was heard by Supreme Court of India. The Supreme Court of India ruled that Indian personal law required ex-husbands to pay alimony, and Indian law overruled Muslim personal law in Indian courts. The decision in Bano Begum's favor outraged male Muslim leaders, who viewed the decision as an assault on Muslims' rights to cultural and legal autonomy. Under strong pressure from conservative Muslim groups, the Congress government passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986, which denied Muslim divorcees the right to alimony. The Act remains controversial to this day, with many supporters of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party accusing the Congress Party of pandering to Muslims to gain votes.

Under Muslim personal law in India, a man can divorce his wife through triple *talaq*. In short, the procedure involves the man pronouncing "*talaq*" three times in the presence of his wife to legally divorce her. While some Islamic scholars argue that the Quran dictates a waiting period between the first and last pronouncements of "*talaq*," in practice such delays can be ignored. Triple

*talaq* does not require the wife's consent. A divorce initiated by the woman is known as *khula*. *Khula* requires the husband and wife to sign documents agreeing to the divorce in the presence of an Islamic official or *kazi*. The imbalance of power between men and women in divorce fosters a situation in which women may be compelled to remain with an abusive husband who will deny her access to jobs or education or physically harm her. Such was the case with a 27-year-old preschool teacher I met at a government-run school in Old City. She told me that her husband was emotionally and physically abusive; he had an affair with another woman and forced his wife to submit to him sexually. She asked him for a divorce, but he refused to sign the necessary documents. After another difficult year, he agreed to divorce his wife and performed *talaq*.

Divorce was generally stigmatized in Hyderabad, and divorcees faced economic and social challenges as a result. Sometimes when women were divorced and needed to work to support themselves, they sent their children to residential hostels because they could not care for them sufficiently. This led to further stigmatization for divorced women who were regarded not only as poor wives, but also as poor mothers. The experiences of the preschool teacher I interviewed illustrated the differences that men and women faced regarding divorce. The teacher described the social stigma she faced from her brothers and neighbors, who told her to return to her husband. Her mother was sympathetic to her, and since the teacher also works as a counselor with an anti-domestic violence NGO, she was able to connect with other women who supported her decisions.

*Pardah*, or veiling, was another relevant aspect of Muslim women's social lives. Muslim girls learned to cover their heads in appropriate contexts at a young age, but most Muslim women and adolescent girls wore black robes over their clothes and facial veils when they left their houses. Several informants told me they chose to wear the *burka* without pressure from family members, but others, including Noor Jahan, felt restricted by the expectation to wear *burka* in the presence

of non-related men. Noor Jahan's opinion was shaped by the relatively freer atmosphere of her youth. She grew up in the state of Maharashtra, and she declared, "I'm Maharashtrian, and we are free. My marriage, opposite family" (Interview: July 2, 2014). She enjoyed riding bicycles and playing sports before marriage, but after her marriage at age sixteen she was not permitted to leave the house without her husband's permission, and she was required to wear burka. Noor Jahan often drew upon her separate experiences in Maharashtra, which she characterized as a progressive state for women's rights, as an ideal contrast to the oppression of women in Hyderabad.

### **Structure of Indian Educational System and Relevant Terminology**

I quickly learned during interviews that the word "college" as Ayesha and other informants used it had a very different meaning in India than in the United States. While Americans tend to use the word "college" interchangeably with "university," in India the word "college" refers to the eleventh and twelfth grade levels of education. Another term for the same level is "intermediate" or simply "inter." Here I discuss the general structure of Indian education and terms that I employ throughout this paper.

The three types of schools relevant to my research are government schools, private schools, and *madrassas*. I do not include residential hostels as a type of school. Although some hostels offer classes, the children of the residential hostel I visited attend classes at a nearby government school. In Hyderabad, private school classes are taught in English, while government schools conduct classes in Urdu or Telugu, depending on the area. After a few interviews, I came to recognize that "Urdu medium" is shorthand for a government school that conducts classes in Urdu. While there are some government schools that conduct classes in English, every case of "English

medium” schools discussed by my interlocutors was in the context of a private school. Of my 31 informants, 15 received their education solely from government schools, six were educated solely in private schools, three attended both government and private schools at various points in their studies, and three attended *madrassas*. The remaining four informants received no formal education or did not provide this particular piece of information. (For additional information on informants’ educational status, see Appendix A.)

The people I spoke with hold government schools in rather low esteem. Parents generally preferred to send their children to English medium private schools if they could afford the necessary fees. One government school teacher said that government schools often lacked resources such as textbooks and other necessary educational supplies. She also maintained that her students’ parents were insufficiently invested in the education process. The teacher pointed out that the majority of students in the primary school class did not wear school uniforms, even though the school’s teachers requested that parents buy uniforms for their children. Additionally, she was convinced that parents did not make their children complete homework, and they did not study after school hours. Since government schools were required to promote students based on age rather than academic achievement, some underprepared students who do not perform at grade level moved up in grade levels and graduated tenth standard regardless of their ability. For that reason, it was common for government school students to pay for after-school tutoring, or as locals called it, “tuitions.” Tutoring students in various subjects allowed women to earn money without going outside the home, since the students went to tutors’ homes for lessons. Similarly, many women who studied in *madrassas* earned money by teaching their neighbors’ children how to read and understand the Quran.



Grade levels were referred to as “standards” and generally correlate to American grade levels. However, the division of schools by grade level in India is specific to that country. Some parents send their children to preschool or kindergarten, while other students begin in first class. Primary school includes standards one through eight. Secondary school comprises standards nine and ten, and completing tenth class is similar to Americans completing high school. Upon completing tenth standard, the student is considered to be an appropriate candidate for a standard office job. Recently, education has become more competitive and jobs harder to find. Of the 31 women I interviewed, 25 had studied at least through tenth standard.<sup>8</sup>

After completing tenth standard students can enroll in intermediate school or “college” to study further. Intermediate school includes eleventh and twelfth standards and involves specialization of coursework rather than one general curriculum. Students can study commerce, the sciences (biology, chemistry, and physics), mathematics, or history. This is not a comprehensive list of the subjects available for study in intermediate school, but it includes those subjects which were mentioned by my informants. Sixteen of 31 women I interviewed had completed intermediate school, and another informant was studying in eleventh standard at the time this research was conducted.

Many women went on to pursue a university degree at the Bachelor’s or Master’s level once they had completed intermediate school. While I do not have data for all Hyderabad universities, the staff at the University of Hyderabad proudly announced to my study abroad cohort that about one-third of the students enrolled at the University of Hyderabad in spring 2013 were female. It is reasonable to conclude that Hyderabad men pursue university degrees in greater

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<sup>8</sup> This sample is not representative of all women in Old City or in the city of Hyderabad. My sample is skewed toward better-educated women for two reasons: a majority of the women I interviewed work outside the home on social issues, and women who are better educated are more likely to work outside the home, and several other informants work as schoolteachers. Schoolteachers generally have more formal education than housewives do.

numbers than do women. Bachelor's degrees are generally three-year programs of study, and Master's degrees may require two additional years of study. Six of the 31 women I interviewed held Bachelor's degrees in subjects including commerce, Urdu literature, English literature, science, political science, history, and education. Two women completed *fazil*, which is equivalent to a Bachelor's degree in Islamic studies, and two women held Master's degrees, one in Arabic and one in Urdu. Both women with Master's degrees worked as teachers at the time of this research project.

Finally, there are some differences between education in a government or private school and education in a *madrassa*. In some majority-Muslim countries such as Pakistan, *madrassas* are the only form of education available to many students and are in direct competition with state-run schools to produce students with secondary or tertiary education (Adelkhah and Sakurai 2011). However, in the case of Hyderabad, the *madrassa* functions to socialize young Muslims and encourages them to learn more about the Quran and Islamic traditions. While I cannot speak for every school, the teachers at the *madrassa* I visited explained that students (in that case, all girls) learned English, math, social studies, science, and Quran until sixth standard. After sixth standard, students focused on memorizing the Quran. The teachers told me that if students begin memorizing the Quran before they are in tenth standard, it generally took them five years to become a *hafis*, or reciter of the Quran. If the students begin to learn the Quran after tenth standard, it generally took them eight years to become a *hafis*. While *madrassas* focus largely on Islamic studies, they also prepare students to pass standard exams for entrance to universities and other higher education programs.

## **Structure**

The body of my thesis consists of five chapters divided into two parts. In Part I, I describe the financial and social barriers that limit women's educational opportunities in the Old City. In the first chapter, I discuss financial barriers to formal education for girls, including poverty, the joined family structure that rewards parents of sons with more income than those of daughters, and a (perceived) lack of jobs that can provide upward economic mobility. The second chapter examines social pressures from the family and community that delay or prevent young women from pursuing higher levels of formal education. These include patriarchal family structure, the influence of education levels on marriage prospects, prioritization of early marriage and motherhood, and local religious leaders who warn that higher education will make wives less obedient. In Part I, I enumerate these barriers and provide examples from my fieldwork of how such barriers impacted the lives of my informants.

In Part II, I examine how my informants were able to enact change, increase educational opportunities for girls in the Old City, and improve the general status of girls and women in their community. In Chapter 3, I connect the general proliferation of NGOs in India to the empowerment of women as both beneficiaries and employees of social NGOs. Through building schools and raising awareness of women's rights under the law, Hyderabad NGOs have reduced the severity of barriers to girls' education in the Old City, and my informants were optimistic about their children's opportunities. In Chapter 4, I discuss the cultural importance of self-sacrificial motherhood and the ways my informants' sacrifices for their children further their children's educational and employment prospects. In Chapter 5, I describe the role of Islamic belief and practice in my informants' lives and draw on alternative interpretations of the Quran to

demonstrate how women in the Old City work within traditional structures to improve their own status as valued members of the community.

In the conclusion, I summarize my findings and suggest possible directions for future research in this area. I also discuss how my research can be included in studies tracking change in attitudes toward women's education in Old City Hyderabad.

# **Part I**

## **Barriers to Girls' and Women's Education**

Through interviews conducted with 31 Muslim women from Old City Hyderabad, I found that although it is common for girls in the Old City to acquire a tenth standard level of education, many women had personal or second-hand anecdotes of girls and women who were unable to pursue higher education due to various barriers and challenges. Some of the barriers were financial – some girls' parents did not have the money to educate their daughters through a university degree, and others, who viewed girls' education as a poor return on investment, refused to spend their limited funds on tuition and related educational expenses.

In addition to financial troubles, many young women were constrained in their pursuit of higher education by traditional gender norms and local expectations of behavior. Many informants were expected to marry in their late teenage years and begin raising children instead of being encouraged to pursue higher education. Young women's marriageability was paramount, and higher education was viewed as a potential liability when seeking a husband, and a distraction when young women began to raise families. Patriarchal leadership in the family and the community also limited dreams of higher education, since some men in the community opposed secular post-secondary education for women.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Financial Barriers to Girls' and Women's Education**

The Old City area of Hyderabad is one of the poorest areas of the city. The glamorous shopping malls of Banjara Hills and Hi-Tech City give way to open street markets in the Old City, where men's income is often uncertain and varies based on their success at selling fruits, vegetables, clothes, bangles, or other goods for retail. Informants told me that while women working outside the home is relatively rare, the practice had become more common in recent years, as the cost of living rises in Hyderabad. Many Muslim women and girls in Old City Hyderabad are unable to complete intermediate school or a university degree due to lack of money and material resources. Among financial barriers, I discuss the effects of poverty, unemployment, and gendered economic roles as factors that inhibit access to quality education.

#### **Poverty**

Perhaps the most obvious financial barrier to girls' and women's education is poverty. The Old City of Hyderabad has a high rate of poverty compared to more developed areas of Hyderabad.<sup>9</sup> Large families are typical in the Old City, and some parents have difficulty paying for educational supplies and instruction for their children. Families who have difficulty making

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<sup>9</sup> In general, Muslim communities in Indian cities are poorer than majority Hindu communities. Indian scholars such as Asghar Ali Engineer concluded that communal conflict reinforces economic segregation between different religious communities (1995). According to these scholars, threat of retaliatory violence compels merchants to stay within their own communities and limits opportunities for economic growth. With this in mind, the efforts of women living in the Old City to promote communal harmony may also constitute an indirect mode of economic development in the Old City.

ends meet may pull their children out of school so they can earn money by begging or helping their parents to sell goods. Immediate financial challenges, such as providing shelter, food, and clothing for family members, impose a significant burden on parents in Old City Hyderabad, and such challenges can overshadow any perceived benefits that a costly education may bestow in the future. As one informant told me, “[people living in slum areas] will say that seven years [old] boy, if he works in a company, or other job, or in a small café, something like that, so he can make 10 rupees a day. So why should we send him to school?” (Interview, August 8, 2014) She noted that although it is common for middle-class families in Hyderabad to send their children to school through the secondary level, many lower-class families do not recognize any substantial benefit to educating children. (This is particularly true for girls, since women’s earning potential is not often a central concern for their families.)

Government schools are free for children, but most of my informants regarded them as poor quality and under-resourced. One government teacher I spoke with in Hyderabad complained that parents do not invest in her students’ education. As an example, she pointed out that few children in the third standard class I observed wore school uniforms; instead, the students wore different colored shirts in plaid, striped, and solid patterns. The teacher told me she requested that parents ensure their children wear uniforms to school, but the requests went unheeded. She also asserted that parents do not push their children to complete their homework, and as a result, students without strong motivation at home are not able to keep up in class. According to my informants, parents of private school students generally invest more time and energy in their children’s formal studies because they expect a return on their financial investment in the schools. However, personal motivations and ambitions for children also influence parents’ investment, and

there are many parents of government school children who are very involved in their children's education.

Even with parental support, a government school education was considered by my interlocutors to be insufficient in itself to provide a quality education. To improve their skills in English, Urdu, math, and science, students in government schools pay private tutors for "tuitions," which may consist of individual or group tutoring by an older student or adult. Several women I spoke with worked in their homes as tutors, teaching government school students Urdu, Hindi, English, or science, or providing lessons in Arabic and reading the Quran to students from both government and private schools. Ayesha, one of my informants who attended private schools as a child to learn English,<sup>10</sup> paid half her school fees from the money she earned as a tutor. She described her childhood as difficult, since her family experienced financial instability and deprivation. Ayesha was born in Secunderabad, a town which is often considered a "twin city" to Hyderabad. In Secunderabad, she was able to access high-quality schools, but when she was ten years old, her family moved to the Old City. Ayesha stated, "When we came to Old City, we eat only at morning, till night, there is no food for us. And there were no resources. It's easier now to earn money, but at that time it was very difficult for us" (Interview: August 8, 2014). Her family's financial situation improved when she and her older brother began working to finance their private educations. Ayesha tutored students (some older than she) in English, since she had more experience learning the language in a private school rather than in a government school. She credited Huda, her mother, with her passion for education. Huda took an active role in her children's education and advocated for their formal education in spite of opposition from male

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<sup>10</sup> According to my informants, there were no English-medium government schools in the Old City area of Hyderabad. Because of this, Ayesha's family encouraged her to work and attend private schools where classes were taught in English. An English education is certainly an advantage for young Indians, since it qualifies them for higher-paying jobs with greater opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.



relatives. Ayesha paid half of her private school fees by tutoring, and her parents, who both worked when they could find the opportunity, contributed the rest of the money. As a mother herself, Ayesha advocated for her children's education and paid for their private school fees out of her salary as a Peacemaker with My Choices, since her husband, an auto-rickshaw driver, was not able to support his wife and children with his earnings.<sup>11</sup>

Some parents in the Old City who could not afford to pay for their children's material needs, let alone tutoring, sent their children to live in residential hostels. I visited one such hostel in July 2014 which housed around 100 children between ages five and fourteen. Funded through donations from NGOs, the hostel ensured the children's education until tenth standard by sending them to government schools and offering additional lessons on site. Employees of the hostel included its manager Shahnaz, her family, who help cook and care for the children, and teachers who worked long hours and returned to their homes at evening. Some students at the hostel were orphans, but others were sent to the hostel by family members who could no longer afford to care for them. One of the hostel's teachers introduced me to two girls who lived in the hostel, aged five and four. She told me the girls' mother recently divorced from her husband and was too busy earning money to support herself to take care of her daughters. The teacher told me the girls had begun to live at the hostel about one month before my visit. Parents of the children visited occasionally, but hostel workers took care of them on a daily basis. Government programs to alleviate the burden of poverty help some organizations fund hostels and shelters for poor children, but the issue of poverty still overwhelms many families (UNICEF 2014).

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<sup>11</sup> Gender norms in India generally require men to be the primary breadwinners in the family, so Ayesha out-earning her husband was a source of contention between her husband and other relatives. Her husband was held in low esteem because he was unable to sufficiently provide for all his family's material needs.

Girls with the financial resources and support to complete intermediate school face challenges that can prevent them from pursuing higher education. It is common in the Old City for young women to marry at sixteen or seventeen years old. Sometimes, newly married girls are too busy with their new household responsibilities to pursue a university or technical education. Others depend on financial and child-rearing assistance from their new parents-in-law. In addition to the fees charged by institutions of higher education, preparation courses for exams are common, and some students are compelled to spend money on prep courses to improve their scores on entrance exams. Abeer, an eighteen-year-old student in pharmacy school, told me she had originally planned to attend medical school but was prevented from enrolling for two reasons: the higher fees associated with medical school and her lack of placement in a Hyderabad medical school. According to my interlocutors, aspiring applicants to universities and professional schools write an examination months before the beginning of the academic year. As classes begin, enrollment begins until all the spots or “seats” in the incoming class are full. The application process is quite competitive, and having access to exam preparation courses can make the difference between acceptance and rejection. Therefore, higher education requires a significant financial investment that is often contingent upon a woman’s in-laws and their available resources. When women’s education is not financially prioritized by their in-laws, they may be prevented from pursuing higher education.

### **Unemployment**

The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights formally recognized education as a human right for all boys and girls (1948). However, the material reality of poverty

sometimes supersedes ideal values, and children are sent to work to help their families. This plays out in unemployment and underemployment, which reflect increasing income inequality in India (Kaushik 2014). The uncertain economic climate after the 2008 global financial crisis led Indians to question the return on investment in their children's education. Paying for formal education, particularly higher education, seemed like an irresponsible financial investment when the likelihood of finding a skilled job is low.

Although the global economic crisis of 2008 spurred a critique to the dream of economic mobility and the failure of higher education to guarantee a higher standard of living, conservative attitudes toward unemployment and education are not new. Ayesha told me that during her childhood in the 1990s, "My uncle, he [didn't want her brother to] go to college and all. And he don't want to work that. Because he thought that uneducated persons also do the same thing, I also do [the] same thing, so it's not working [to gain economic mobility]" (Interview: August 8, 2014). However, Ayesha's uncle's fears were unfounded in the case of her brother, who graduated with a university degree in civil engineering, settled in Dubai, and sent a substantial portion of his salary to his family in Hyderabad.<sup>12</sup> With the remittances he sent to India, his parents bought a comfortable house, and his three sisters had enough money to get married successfully.

When I spoke with Ayesha about barriers to girls' education in Hyderabad, she described the gender-specific problem of parents not educating girls because girls contribute their labor and earnings to their husbands' parents, rather than their natal homes. She added that many boys in the

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<sup>12</sup> Much has been written about South Asian migrants to the Gulf States and their remittances back to their families (Athukorala 1993, Buch and Kuckulenz 2010). However, since much of the literature focuses on the plight of Indian construction workers in the Gulf States, I was not aware of the number of skilled artisans and engineers who migrate from India to the Gulf States to earn for themselves and their families. Other interlocutors told me about brothers, fathers, and uncles who worked as clothing designers in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Saudi Arabia.

community are prevented from pursuing education because of their parents' pessimism regarding the job market:

Too, people think that educating both [boys and girls], they are not doing [it]...because they think if a boy studied a lot, and he did not get a good job, along with his studies, so he did not do any [skilled job]...and they [parents] send them [children] to labor, like any technical thing they will send them, but they did not send [the children] to schools (Interview: July 2, 2014).

Daily wage labor, or informal labor, is prevalent in the Old City. Many informants' husbands work in the informal sector as auto, cab, and lorry drivers, as well as merchants selling food, bangles, and beverages. Since their own work does not require higher education, many of these men are skeptical that education beyond the primary or secondary level would substantially improve their children's employment prospects. In spite of the Indian government's efforts to encourage education for all Indian children, the material realities of poverty and unemployment motivate some parents to send their children to work rather than to school.

### **Married Women's Earnings Usually Contribute to In-Laws' Income**

Return on investment is an important component of the economics of education, and it is not limited to India. By sending children to private school or tutoring, parents invest their (often limited) financial resources into their children's education, and they may expect their children to share their income in return for that investment. In spite of free tuition, some Hyderabadi parents

do not send their children to government schools and instead put them to work to supplement their families' incomes. There is no guarantee that an education will support a family and help it to achieve a basic standard of living, and therefore many parents are unwilling to regularly send their children to school unless they can reasonably expect their children to provide for them in their old age. Many parents prioritize their sons' education over their daughters' because Indian men usually live with their own parents after marriage, while Indian women usually live with their in-laws after marriage.

Locally (in the Old City section of Hyderabad) and nationally, arranged marriages and cohabitation with extended family are common. Generally, women leave their natal homes at marriage and live with their husbands, parents-in-law, and brothers- or sisters-in-law and their children.<sup>13</sup> Among my interlocutors, such a family structure was called a "joint family." The women I spoke with treated arranged marriage and the joint family structure as the norm. Some of my interlocutors expressed their approval of arranged marriages, indicating that the approval of all parties involved (including extended family) laid the foundation for harmonious marriages.

One vignette that illustrates the prevalence and cultural significance of the joint family structure involved a woman who described her family with the assistance of an interpreter. When I asked Zaheda about her household, she told the interpreter that she and her husband did not live with his parents. The interpreter began to speak very animatedly in Urdu with Zaheda, and she explained that the latter had a "love marriage." Zaheda had moved out of her parents' home to work and support herself. She met her future husband in the building where they both rented apartments, and they decided to marry. The interpreter's enthusiastic reaction was telling – it was

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<sup>13</sup> Data on marriage in India are unreliable, since many marriages are formalized through a religious ceremony rather than a civil contract, and records are not always available. The prevalence of underage marriage and dowry payments is acknowledged by celebrities, scholars, and laypeople alike, although these practices are not always formally documented.

readily apparent that a love marriage was considered unusual and an exciting departure from traditional family structures.

The joint family structure transferred a woman's responsibilities from her birth parents (before she married) to her husband's parents (after she married). Although Muslim women in Hyderabad often own property, their earnings contribute to their household incomes. Parents with limited resources may view spending them on daughters as a waste, since their daughters will leave their household and earn income for another family. Sons, on the other hand, are expected to earn for their birth parents. According to my interlocutors, this was one reason parents were more willing to send boys to school than girls. One stated, "People think education is important only for boys because girls won't earn" (Interview: July 2, 2014). This sentiment was echoed by others. One woman, who had worked with NGOs to promote girls' education in Hyderabad, countered men's claims that they could not afford to educate their daughters by pointing out ways they could find money for education, including cutting back on smoking tobacco and chewing *pan*. She claimed that a significantly large proportion of Hyderabadi girls are being educated through tenth standard, compared with the situation in previous decades.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Social Barriers to Girls' and Women's Education**

Barriers to women's education often stem from a lack of material resources and prevailing social norms in the Old City community of Hyderabad. Various sociocultural factors affect the social landscape of the majority-Muslim community where my interlocutors lived, including patriarchal family structure in which men have significant control over the movement of their female relatives, the importance of negotiating suitable marriage prospects for young women, prioritization of early marriage and motherhood, and local religious leaders who preach that higher education for girls is un-Islamic. In this chapter, I elaborate on each of these factors.

First, it is necessary to define what "community" means in the context of my thesis. In India, the word "community" can pertain to a locale or to a group of people who share common values or practices (most often, as part of an organized religion), and it ranges from a small neighborhood to villages of 100,000 people or more. Individuals employed concepts of "community" contextually – when my interlocutors described conducting social work in "the community," they generally referenced the inhabitants of certain area within the Old City. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the word "community" to describe Muslim families living in non-slum areas of Old City Hyderabad.

My informants recognized another prominent definition of "community" as the Islamic *umma*. The *umma* is the Muslim community, which is not defined by global political boundaries, but instead emphasized the unifying power of Islam. Many Hyderabad Muslims expressed

solidarity with Muslims around the world.<sup>14</sup> The word “communal” was used almost invariably to describe conflict between different religious groups within India.

### **Patriarchal Family Structure**

Gender inequality is not unique to India or Islam, although it has been blamed on both Indian culture (as nebulous a concept as that is) and Islam. India as a whole struggles with gender-based violence, including sex-selective abortion in favor of male children and everyday discrimination against female children (Bharati et al. 2011). According to my interlocutors, the ultimate decision-maker in traditional families is always the male head of the household. Other members of the family must seek his permission to work, go to school, and travel. There are no legal requirements that prohibit an unaccompanied woman from participating in such activities, but disobeying a husband or father may have severe social consequences, such as ostracism from the social group and poor treatment by husbands and in-laws. As one interlocutor told me, “If our husbands say no, we cannot go out. When husband will support us, then only can we come out of home. Otherwise we can’t” (Conversation: July 8, 2014).

When women disobeyed their husbands, they risked not only their husbands’ anger but also the social disapproval of others in the community. Ayesha helped to translate when I interviewed Noor Jahan Siddiqui about her late husband’s reaction to her women’s rights activism. Ayesha said, “He always object[ed] to her...So if he observes her [working outside the home], she says, ‘it’s ok, he’s my husband, I’m not doing anything wrong, so it’s ok for me’...If she fights

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<sup>14</sup> During July 2014, Hyderabad Muslims prayed for the people of Gaza in their conflict with Israel. Some distributed pamphlets that displayed a list of corporations for Muslims to boycott in protest of their business with the Israeli military. A local English newspaper ran a story about how wealthy and famous Hyderabad Muslims had stopped throwing elaborate *iftar* parties during July in protest of the Israeli offensive against Israel and the civilians who were killed.



with her husband, [she says] she wants to earn for her children, for their studies and everything, so if she fights with her husband, she is not allowed to go out and do work.” (Interview: July 2, 2014) I heard similar comments from all the married women I interviewed – although women enjoy legal freedom of movement and can work alone, their husbands and parents-in-law impose restrictions on them and retain ultimate veto power when it comes to family members’ schooling, marriage, and employment.

Some husbands and fathers were supportive and helped their female relatives fund their formal education. In particular, interlocutors who held university degrees expressed gratitude for the permissive or encouraging attitudes of the patriarchs in their households. When I spoke with Ayesha and her mother, Huda, about their family, they told me that when Huda and her husband were married, Huda’s in-laws did not support her educational pursuits. After a year of living with her husband and his family, Huda and her husband moved out on their own. With support from her husband, Huda completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Urdu literature and history, and she worked outside the home for decades in various social NGOs. At the time of research, Huda worked for My Choices as a counselor. Ayesha explained that Huda would become very bored and depressed if she did not have work to occupy her.

During a conversation with Shanaz, I met her sixteen-year-old and thirteen-year-old daughters. They were both in private school and professed a passion for mathematics. The older girl wanted to attend medical school someday and become an eye doctor, while the younger girl planned to become an aerospace engineer. When I asked what inspired them to pursue careers in science, they told me about encouraging teachers and their “Mama,” or uncle, who wrote letters to the girls and encouraged them to study hard and choose an ambitious career path. Unlike their

mother and aunt, the girls planned to earn university degrees with the support of their uncle and grandfather.

These stories capture the complications of familial restrictions and permission in local attitudes toward women's education. Although there are limited data to quantify attitudes toward women's education, interlocutors described a trend toward more male support for women's formal education. This development is tempered by the social constraints that privilege men's decision-making power over that of women in local families. Women are still constrained by the expectation of obedience and acquiescence to their male relatives' decisions, and fathers' attitudes shape their children's educational opportunities.

### **The Marriage Question – Finding Suitable Marriage Prospects**

“Shaadi.” The Hindi/Urdu word for “marriage” conjures up myriad emotions, visuals, and ideological constructs, particularly among women. Aside from the glamour and excitement of the wedding ceremony, the social and legal institutions of marriage form a strong foundation for family life in the Old City. Marriage is especially important to women, since most women in the Old City rely on husbands for economic stability and the social status that comes with marriage and motherhood. Because marriage is such an important aspect of life for young women, parents try to raise daughters to be compatible spouses to young family friends. Sometimes highly educated women are considered better candidates for marriage, but men generally prefer women with equal or less education than themselves. (Many educated women in Egypt, another society which encourages women's obedience to their husbands, also prefer a partner who is more

educated than they are, since they believed women are more mature than men and they would not obey men who were younger or less educated than they [Fernea and Fernea 2011].)

As in most of India, marriages in the Old City are arranged by the bride and groom's parents (Desai and Andrist 2010). Potential spouses are vetted and approved by both families, and they are often chosen from family friends and distant relatives. Moreover, sex segregation in informal spaces provides few opportunities for young women to meet potential suitors without a formal introduction (Klass 2009). Parents judge compatibility of the match based on both personal and cultural values, such as health, income, education, and family background. Many men refuse to marry women with more education than they, so higher education can diminish a woman's marriageability. Parents may prevent girls from pursuing higher education and decreasing their marriageability, since marriage is a high priority in the community.

Zaina, an unmarried 20-year-old woman, worked as a Peacemaker at My Choices while she studied commerce in intermediate school. Her father and brother worked as bangle vendors and earned little. During July 2014, she was studying commerce in eleventh standard at an all-girls' intermediate school in Hyderabad, but her parents would not support her goals to pursue a university degree. I asked why her parents would not allow her to attend formal classes past twelfth standard. Ayesha translated Zaina's response:

Why, because no one [Zaina could marry] is studied till tenth, and so if she studies a lot, there is a problem, if they will find a boy for marriage. So if she studies a lot, she won't [be able to find] a perfect match and all. People think like that.

Me: That if you have too much education you cannot marry?

Ayesha: They don't get a perfect groom to marry. They think like that (Interview: July 2, 2014).

Zaina was encouraged by her teachers, friends, and mother to pursue further studies after completing tenth standard, but her father was initially opposed to intermediate education for her. Zaina's mother finally convinced him to support Zaina's studies through the intermediate level, but not further than twelfth standard, lest their daughter's education intimidate potential husbands. This is one example of the ways women negotiated options for their children by convincing their husbands to support them.

After the interview with Zaina, I asked Ayesha whether parents in the community held similar attitudes about young women working outside the home. Would working outside the home decrease a woman's marriage prospects? "No," Ayesha said. "It's not like that. Earlier it [was] like that, but not it's not like that...Even after marriage they want the girls to work" (Interview: July 2, 2014). Ayesha attributed the shift in attitude largely to economic problems, as the cost of living in Hyderabad has risen. According to my interlocutors, women are more often encouraged to work and contribute to the household income than they are to pursue higher education.

### **Prioritization of Early Marriage and Motherhood**

Marriage and motherhood come with many responsibilities, especially for teenage girls who experience a sharp break with their childhood when they leave their natal home to be married. Even with financial and emotional support from their in-laws, the responsibilities of raising a family and keeping an orderly home present a significant challenge to pursuing higher education

for young women. Non-academic training programs such as sewing centers provide flexible schedules and allow women to gain a practical skill, and their structure is adapted to the chaotic nature of maternal life.

Fourteen of thirty-one women I interviewed (45 percent) were married before the age of 18, even though all the women in my sample were married after the minimum legal age of marriage for women was raised to 18 years of age. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 first legislated the minimum age of marriage to 14 years old for females and 18 years old for males. In 1978 the Act was amended to define the age of marriage as 18 years old for females and 21 years old for males. However, the law was not widely enforced. In 1999, the United Nations *World's Women* report indicated that 30 percent of Indian women aged 15-19 had been married at some point in their lives. Even though the prevalence of child marriage varied among different states of India, it was regarded as an important issue confronting Indian society in 2014. The prevalence and relative acceptance of early marriage means many girls are married before they complete intermediate school and develop the skills to assert themselves in household decision-making.

In many countries around the world, marriage is a turning point in a woman's life. A majority of Indian women live with their husbands' families after marriage. In some cases, like Noor Jahan's, women who experienced freedom of movement and opportunities in their natal homes move to live with restrictive in-laws. However, even women who get along with their in-laws face substantial new household and familial responsibilities, which only increase after they have children.<sup>15</sup> Women are expected to keep their homes clean, cook for their families (often with

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<sup>15</sup> A new mother's physical and emotional well-being may also depend on the sex of the child. In parts of India, male children are valued more highly than female children, due to their earning potential and ability to represent the family in rituals that are only allowed to be performed by male heirs (Bharati et al. 2011). Boys' births are generally greeted with joy or relief by children's parents and their relatives, but girls' births are viewed in many areas as a cause for sadness and shame. The household dynamics may follow – a woman who gave birth to a boy may receive better treatment from her in-laws than a woman who only gave birth to girls (Thapan 2003).

few supplies and appliances), provide their families with homemade or store-bought clothing, and raise children while their husbands work. The experience of marriage and motherhood can be overwhelming for young women and prevent them from pursuing further formal education.

Mothers' sacrifices for their children are praised in Indian culture, but those sacrifices are also expected. Traditionally, Indian women would serve food to their husbands, parents-in-law, and sons first, saving the least desirable portions for themselves. They are expected to run the house smoothly, cooking meals from scratch and keeping a clean home (Desai and Andrist 2010). This image of the nurturing and self-sacrificing mother is deeply embedded in Indian culture. "Mother India" has been a potent symbol of nationalism since the anti-colonial struggle of the late nineteenth century, and it is still relevant today. In an everyday context, veneration of motherhood is used to sell both goods and ideas. Advertisements trade on the cultural capital of motherhood to convince consumers to buy their products, and politicians used the image of mothers and the sacred Hindu cow to stir up nationalistic sentiments for the last century (Gupta 2001). This cultural emphasis on mothers' sacrifices compel young mothers to devote all of their time to household chores and child rearing instead of pursuing higher education.

Sadaf, a 35-year-old headmistress of a government school, discussed the pressures of family and her job during an interview in her office at the school. First married at the age of sixteen, Sadaf was childless throughout her first marriage. After nine years of marriage, Sadaf and her first husband divorced, and Sadaf lived with her parents. She thought of marrying an Indian living abroad due to the stigma associated with divorce, but her future father-in-law approached her parents with an offer of marriage to his son. Sadaf's second husband was also previously married and was father to five children. Happily, Sadaf was able to conceive with her second husband, and by July 2014, the couple had a seven-year-old daughter. Sadaf's husband taught at the same school

that Sadaf managed for nineteen years, and Sadaf began working there fourteen years ago. She managed the government school, while her husband, a *hafis*, taught Arabic and the Quran in an adjoining *madrassa*.

Sadaf expressed a love for both learning and teaching. She studied through twelfth standard and said she would like to pursue further studies someday. I asked why she was unable to. “It’s about responsibilities,” Ayesha translated. “School responsibilities, household responsibilities, even her family problems also.” Especially for working women, the time required to fulfill their household duties could be overwhelming. While a few informants managed to earn degrees when they were older, others echoed Sadaf and said that family responsibilities kept them from pursuing further education.

The burden of household responsibilities lay primarily with mothers in Hyderabad. Since many women take on paid work in addition to their domestic labor, they lacked the time required to earn a degree. Early motherhood and its associated responsibilities are examples of how cultural norms can shape opportunities for young people, even when they desire additional education.

### **Opposition from Religious Leaders**

Religious leaders are esteemed among various traditions in India. One need only observe the outrage and threats of violence generated by the Aamir Khan film “PK,” which was released in 2014, to understand the sensitivity of religious issues in Indian culture. “PK” pokes fun at so-called “godmen” who claim special knowledge and abilities through the comedic story of an alien who comes to India. The film was pulled from a few theaters after threats of violence from Hindu political groups who found the comedic treatment of Shiva and other Hindu figures to be offensive

(Deshpande 2014). While a complete discussion of the social relations between religious leaders and their audience of laypeople is beyond the realm of my thesis, it is worth noting that religious leaders and public figures are often considered unassailable in their divinely sanctioned authority. This places women, non-believers, and other marginalized groups in a vulnerable position, since local religious leaders are men and do not suffer repercussions of rhetoric limiting women's opportunities. Although their opinions may not be shared by all or even most men in the Old City, religious leaders have significant influence in the community because of their public platform and appeal to divine authority. According to the women I interviewed, at least some local religious leaders use their influence to regulate women's behavior, including their education.

During my two-month stay in Hyderabad, I did not attend any events with local leaders, nor did I visit a mosque, for a few reasons. I did not attend local political events because during my stay, there was relatively little conflict or substantive political action. A more important factor, though, was the relative exclusion of women from public religious and political discourse in the Old City. All the Muslim women I spoke to in Hyderabad concurred that as a rule, Indian women do not worship in the mosques beside their husbands. While the Muslim men in a family I visited conducted their morning and evening prayers in the local mosque, women rolled out prayer rugs on the stone floor of the home and said their prayers quietly. On Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, women sometimes form their own groups to discuss the Quran and associated *hadiths*.<sup>16</sup> At the women's prayer meeting I attended, one bespectacled woman in a black *abaya* read a religious lesson in Urdu and then proceeded to address the women directly. A friend who spoke both Urdu and English translated enough for me to understand that the teacher was instructing the women on the rules of Ramadan and describing the manifold rewards that Allah would bestow upon them in

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<sup>16</sup> *Hadiths* are teachings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and other Islamic leaders. (The veracity of certain *hadiths* vary between different Islamic traditions.)



heaven for following the dictates of the Holy Quran. In contrast, male imams and other religious leaders preach to significant audiences of men in the mosques of Hyderabad about social and political happenings in the city. Such a platform, coupled with charismatic leaders, can wield substantial social influence among its congregation.

In informal conversations with Ayesha, Noor Jahan, and other interlocutors, one barrier to girls' education they described was the position of some conservative leaders in the Muslim community. The women said that some local religious and political leaders publicly opposed secular education for Muslim girls and women, although they did encourage parents to send daughters to *madrassas* for primary education in both Islamic and standard academic subjects. *Madrassas* are viewed by many Muslims as a safer and more wholesome atmosphere for girls and young women than secular schools. Additionally, since *madrassa* students learn about the Quran during the regular school day, their parents do not need to arrange private tutoring in the Quran and Arabic the way other parents do.

Because women do not attend prayer services in mosques, they have few opportunities to shape the dominant discourse among male heads of household and male leaders in the community. However, Muslim women in Hyderabad and worldwide have actively worked to change their male peers' understanding of Islamic behavior and women's status within the Muslim community. In Chapter 5, I discuss the ways my informants used their knowledge of Islam to advocate for women's education and empowerment.

These social barriers to women's education are largely founded in traditional gender roles and family structure, but my informants were optimistic about change at the familial and societal levels. Through social NGOs like My Choices and the empowerment programs they offered, women were able to increase their influence within the household and the community in the Old

City. In Part II, I discuss some of the ways women have targeted these social barriers and negotiated their status within the community.

## Part II

### Forces for Social Change

In Part I, I enumerated barriers to girls' education in Old City Hyderabad that can deter or prevent girls from pursuing education beyond tenth standard, such as lack of resources, support, and/or motivation. However, informants told me that girls' participation in educational institutions increased significantly since the 1990s. As Safa told me:

In olden days, they are not giving preference to education, only eating, clothes, house. Nowadays, if they are staying in [the area], they are sending the children [to school]. Even the marketplace, they are working in any slum area, anywhere, but they are sending the children in best, to best education center. If they are sending them to government school, also they are sending the children in evening tuitions. Giving importance to studies nowadays.

Me: Why do you think that changed?

Safa: Because it is very important now. Nobody see what we ate in stomach [gestures to stomach]. But [for example, my daughter's] education is B.Tech [Bachelor of Technology]. Definitely she's daughter, girl, everything. But what is your daughter? What is her qualification? Everybody asks.

Safa and other informants recognized a shift in attitudes toward the value of education for children, especially for girls who were traditionally confined to the domestic sphere. I argue that this shift

in cultural values and expectations was not spontaneous, but was the result of concerted efforts on behalf of NGOs, individual mothers, and Muslim feminists to promote educational and occupational opportunities for girls and women. I discuss these three forces for social change in Old City Hyderabad in the following three chapters.

## Chapter 3

### The Proliferation of Social NGOs in India

While the Indian government provides many services to poor and marginalized Indians, it does not have the resources to provide services to all its citizens. NGOs fill a portion of the void. Many Indians rely on NGOs for food support, agricultural assistance, education, counseling, jobs, and other goods and services (Kelly et al. 2004). Local, national, and international NGOs raise money and awareness for women's issues, among issues of human rights, social equality, and promotion of peaceful coexistence between different groups. In this chapter, I describe the general rise of NGOs and their importance for Indian communities, and I elaborate on the role of the NGOs COVA, My Choices, and women's health organizations in the lives of my informants, particularly the impact of socially conscious work on the self-esteem and self-efficacy of the women who work for NGOs in the Old City.

An "NGO boom" has taken place in India in recent years, and in early 2014, the country's Central Bureau of Investigation estimated that over 2 million NGOs were in operation in India, about one for every 600 people (Mahapatra 2014)<sup>17</sup>. The proliferation of NGOs in India has shaped the economy and Indian society in numerous ways. Some NGOs have delivered on their promises to local population and played a significant role in developing health, literacy, and employment opportunities for Indian men and women. However, Mahapatra points out, tracking NGOs' successes and maintaining accountability to their public and to the government can be difficult. One solution to the issue of accountability includes more strictly defined goals and a focus on

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<sup>17</sup> The author compared the figure to that of police – in 2014, India had one policeman for every 943 people.

economic benchmarks of success rather than social ones. As Aradhana Sharma noted in her study of women's NGOs:

First, the [organization official's] insistence that women be responsible for their own development raises interesting questions in relation to neoliberal notions of competitive entrepreneurialism and self-developing social actors. Second, his assistant's distrust of women's empowerment raises the question of why the term *empowerment* is more threatening for some state representatives than more technical (and apolitical) discourses of development (Sharma 2006).

Sharma describes how NGOs and quasi-governmental organizations act as “self-regulatory models of governance” in the communities they serve, and she concludes that feminist ideals, such as realizing women's empowerment for the sake of women's emotional well-being, are reshaped through the execution of NGOs' programs for women's empowerment. The idealist goals of many nascent NGOs are broadly defined and are sometimes difficult to measure empirically. “Empowerment” can contain vastly different meanings among various individuals, and social NGOs that focus on empowering a segment of the population face challenges in delineating specific goals and measuring the exact impact of their programs.<sup>18</sup> Raising awareness of women's issues and holding programs to teach girls about their rights and responsibilities under the law can be difficult to implement correctly, as one woman from My Choices pointed out to me. She

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<sup>18</sup> In 2013, I briefly volunteered with an NGO in Hyderabad that focused on girls' empowerment through activities that emphasized assertiveness, setting goals, hygiene, nutrition, and education about the risks associated with underage marriage and pregnancy. The (small) NGO staff measured success in terms of girls served by their programs and evaluations at the beginning and end of the programs. Data sampling and evaluations were viewed as essential to the integrity of the organization, as well as its ability to attract donors. However, empowerment is notoriously difficult to quantify, so the precise results of empowerment programs cannot be thoroughly represented in evaluations or surveys.

expressed concern that teachers in schools were instructing girls to contact the police at any time if they were in danger. The My Choices employee explained that such a strategy could in fact place girls in danger because the police force lacks proper oversight, and officers may harass or assault girls who visit police stations at night. Although the teachers were trying to help, their advice might ultimately have been counterproductive. Similarly, education-oriented NGOs face practical questions of evaluating their impact on individual students. Increased participation in formal education and improved examination scores are measures of NGOs' success, but measuring aspects like students' engagement with the material and passion for learning is a challenge. Therefore, empowerment-focused NGOs balance myriad logistical and ideological issues to operate efficiently while staying true to their social missions.

NGOs are generally organized in support of a perceived social good they can define and provide to host communities. NGOs employ varying degrees of organizational hierarchy to accomplish their goals. Organizational hierarchy allows them to make efficient use of volunteers, since long-term NGO employees can train volunteers to perform short-term tasks, and centralized decision-making streamlines the process of defining the NGOs' goals and strategies. The pursuit of those goals can prove challenging. Socially-minded organizations must balance efficiency of service to the community (which may require a hierarchical structure to maximize efficiency) and their commitment to social justice for their workers, as well as their beneficiaries (Mitra 2011). To that end, many empowerment-oriented NGOs emphasize horizontal leadership, which allows them to implement egalitarian values within their own ranks (Srinivasan and Davis 1991). Horizontal leadership privileges the voices and decisions of all members rather than one leader. Proponents of the model argue it provides a model of social justice that should be reflected in the community. The effectiveness of horizontal leadership varies according to the size of the NGO (large, national

NGOs require more resources and bureaucracy than small, local ones) and its representation of the community it serves.<sup>19</sup> Although small NGOs lack the resources of large organizations, they allow a close relationship to be formed between the employees and beneficiaries of the NGOs' work.

NGOs present employment opportunities to Indian women in addition to providing empowerment to their beneficiaries. Indian women's participation in the formal sector, where wages are higher and jobs provide benefits, lags far behind that of Indian men (Das et al. 2015). Instead, Indian women who contribute to their families' income may do so through daily wage work or low-wage salaried work with a non-profit organization or NGO. Women find employment in NGOs as one way to circumvent their traditional exclusion from the formal economy. Additionally, many women are drawn to NGO work through social networks and appeals to the nurturing and sociable aspects of their femininity. Instead of placing women in direct competition with men for jobs or consumers and in contradiction of traditional expectations, (informants' husbands' occupations generally fell into three categories: transportation, selling household goods such as jewelry, clothing, pots, etc., and designing embroidery and *kachwork* patterns on women's clothing), women-centered NGOs provide security, a non-threatening occupation, and a sense of community to their female employees. The safety and comfort of working among a group of women, rather than having to work self-consciously among men to maintain one's reputation and propriety, allows women to participate in the economic and social life of the community with less risk than employment in male-dominated spaces.

Women employees in the Women's Empowerment division of COVA emphasized the idea of horizontal and shared leadership over that of traditional, hierarchical "leaders" (Lane 2011). In

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<sup>19</sup> For example, I met a Hyderabad mid-level manager of a national NGO who owned a three-story house in an expensive area of Hyderabad. Although he worked with low income parents and children on a regular basis, the challenges of his daily life were far removed from those the NGO served. The women of My Choices, on the other hand, lived among the people they served and were not far removed from their economic and social circumstances.



interviews, the women rejected the idea of hierarchical leadership within the NGO and associated formal leadership with the aggression and corruption of the political sphere. In fact, Lane notes that Noor Jahan “even seemed a bit embarrassed” when Lane used the term “leader” to describe the women’s rights activist. Another of Lane’s informants said, “[The women in the movement] don’t believe in leader, if you are a leader they will make you go. If you are a leader go away. But if someone comes as a friend and says if you benefit then I also benefit and [Noor Jahan] is like that” (Interview from Lane 2011). The role of small NGOs like COVA or My Choices in relation to women of the Old City is one of both give and take; the women who are paid to work on health and literacy are from the community they serve, and the service is delivered along a relatively even power gradient. This balanced model of leadership means that many women find their lives enriched through their work and relationships.

The women I spoke with during my research were familiar with the work of NGOs. Six of the women were Peacemakers with My Choices whose duties included raising awareness about domestic violence in their own communities and connecting individuals to My Choices senior counselors. While Noor Jahan and Ayesha were explaining My Choice’s mission to me, they said that most Indian women do not understand their rights and how to respond to domestic violence. A My Choice’s brochure estimates that one in three Indian women is the victim of domestic violence. In writing and in person, the women employed a broad definition of violence, encompassing physical, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse. Ayesha said the senior counselors, like Noor Jahan, do not recommend divorce as a solution to domestic violence, but they do provide individual and family counseling to victims and abusers alike, and they helped some women connect with legal counsel for divorce and dowry cases.

My Choices was founded by a woman from New Zealand who moved to Hyderabad and recognized domestic violence as a global threat to women. The Peacemakers and senior counselors who worked directly with victims of violence are Hyderabadi natives. They share similar backgrounds and values as the community they serve in the Old City and are able to advise individuals and change local attitudes toward women. The prevalence of domestic violence in India is a problem that will persist for some time, but My Choices had helped hundreds of Hyderabadis. In addition to benefiting local victims of violence, My Choices contributes to improved self-esteem and personal empowerment of Peacemakers. Some of the women had never earned money for themselves before, and the income from their jobs improved their status in the home. Others told me they had gained social skills working for My Choices. They were grateful for the opportunity to develop their assertiveness and help their neighbors.

The Peacemakers of My Choices deal with violence as both a social and a personal issue. Cases are held in strict confidentiality, and couples are counseled both separately and together. The Peacemakers also understand that domestic violence is enabled by social attitudes about women and marriage. Married women are expected to obey their husbands without argument and endure any abuse of power by their male relatives (Eswaran and Malhotra 2011). Social problems often require social solutions, and women in Old City relied on each other for emotional support and a refuge from the stresses of household responsibilities. Women socialized among each other at work, in sewing centers during technical classes, and at each other's homes. It is through these social networks that women cope with their stress and realize their own potential. I asked Peacemakers how they came to be involved in My Choices, and every one replied that Noor Jahan or another Peacemaker had recruited them, either directly or through family or friends.

Businesses use advertising – on buses, billboards, and painted walls – to recruit employees, and large, well-established NGOs can trade on their reputation to gain monetary support and labor. However, the mostly-female My Choices recruited Peacemakers through more women-focused means, including word-of-mouth and tapping into existing social networks.<sup>20</sup> The power differential between men and women plays itself out in subtle differences that change recruiting tactics, as well as approaches to conflict. Counseling, which involves more personal interaction and emotional intelligence than strictly legal avenues, is an alternative mode of conflict resolution that skirts the boundary of appropriate female behavior but is still circumscribed in the feminine role of nurturer and builder of relationships. (It is important to note that legal systems in general favor members of the powerful class over marginalized ones, and that men have more influence than women under most Islamic law.) Men are considered naturally dominant, the kind of leaders who make demands and do not compromise readily on those demands. Alternatively, women's conflict resolution styles are characterized by people-pleasing and negotiation. Counseling is one way to solve interpersonal problems in an intimate context with the goal of reaching a mutual agreement rather than favoring one party over another. My Choices counselors do not simply order women's husbands to cease all violent behavior or risk legal action; instead, they encourage husbands and wives to understand the root of their problems and commit to resolving those problems in a non-violent way. By exercising their influence through more traditionally feminine avenues like counseling, the women are able to resist the restrictions placed on them by male relatives and community social norms.

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<sup>20</sup> My Choices' means of recruitment can be understood as "traditionally feminine," an expression for the gender scripts that encourage nurturing and cooperative behavior in women. Such roles position women as men's gentler counterpart, although they also discourage direct competition with men for money or social capital. In addition to this gender norm, my informants demonstrated strong feelings of solidarity toward other women. The shared experiences of womanhood, particularly motherhood, formed the basis of relationships.

I also spoke with teachers, health care workers, and other self-designated social workers.<sup>21</sup> Among the health care workers, a similar social network of recruitment and encouragement emerged. Many women I met worked for a women's health NGO, giving vaccinations to young children and teaching expectant mothers about nutrition and prenatal care. Working for a maternal and children's health NGO is more socially acceptable than counseling, since it is less prone to confrontation between parties involved, and it follows a traditional gender script. Caring for the sick, particularly children, is a feminized aspect of public health work in a few respects: reliance on informal social networks to gain access to employment in this field of work, congruence with women's traditional roles as nurturers in the home, and the social value placed upon work that benefits members of the community directly while minimizing the risks of ideological conflict.<sup>22</sup>

Saida, a health worker with a children and maternal health NGO, acted as a focal point for recruitment in a similar way to Noor Jahan at My Choices. Other workers from the NGO told me that Saida had encouraged them to join. One met Saida through classes at a local sewing center. She had told Saida about her family's financial woes, and Saida had told her about employment opportunities with the NGO.

Although the income provided to the NGO workers is minimal and does not provide enough for the women to support themselves, they report personal satisfaction with their ability to earn money and use their social skills to improve women's health in their community. Health work

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<sup>21</sup> Among my informants, the term "social worker" applied to anyone working in the field of social welfare (most commonly NGOs) and did not necessarily indicate the achievement of a formal credential. "Social worker" also implied relative freedom of movement, since self-identified social workers traveled around Hyderabad and neighboring districts to reach people in need of their services.

<sup>22</sup> Health work regarding immunizations is still controversial in many parts of the world for various reasons, including doubt as to the medical benefits of immunization (as in parts of the United States) and distrust of government programs to encourage immunization (as in Pakistan). However, my informants asserted that over the past ten or fifteen years, most Indians have come to regard immunizations as a positive influence in their lives. As Ayesha told me, "Fifteen years ago, it was like that [people believing vaccines are dangerous]. But now, people have awareness, and they know it's a good thing."

is generally highly regarded in Hyderabad communities, and health workers face less criticism than other NGO workers, such as women's or workers' advocates. Health is a reasonably uncontroversial battleground for advocates – instead of fighting against men or the government, the fight is framed as human against bacterium or virus. Therefore, women can achieve a certain degree of financial independence and freedom of movement with low risk of retaliation by working on children and women's health.

Finally, I met some women who had worked in education-oriented NGOs. Some of the women who worked for education NGOs began as private tutors. Eight informants tutored students in Urdu, English, Arabic, or Quran to earn money. A few proceeded to teach in open school (a type of distance-education in which students meet for class once a week and complete assignments independently between class meetings) and formal settings such as government schools and *madrassas*. Noor Jahan and Khazran, a COVA employee, worked together on education projects in the Old City during the 1990s. According to Khazran, in the mid-1990s, families living in the *bastis*, or slums, had nine children and did not send girls to primary school. The two women organized programs encouraging families to send girls to school, particularly in the *bastis*. Noor Jahan and Khazran spoke to the *basti* residents about the benefits of educating their children through secondary school. With COVA volunteers and support from locals, they opened a preschool for three- to five-year-old children and an open (distance-learning) school for older girls who had dropped out of school. I asked Khazran what she thought of her work on women's education and health in COVA. Ayesha translated Khazran's response:

She said when she was a housewife, she does not know how to go [to] Charminar [a major shopping center in the Old City] also. When she started working, now she's working as a

vendor, as a fruit, vegetable vendor, she started a shop, and she counseled cases, and she was happy with that and was aware a lot. [Laughs] Even now, she is holding the house, the total household, and her husband also! She was always scared with people, and some educated women and anyone, when they come, she would hide her face, but now she is working with them, even she is talking with political leaders about the problems (Interview: July 5, 2014).

Clearly, Khazran's work with marginalized people in Hyderabad was beneficial for her and the *basti* residents. She was born in Maharashtra, but her family relocated to Hyderabad when she was eight years old after riots broke out in their hometown. Khazran's younger brothers and sisters went to school until fifth standard, but Khazran never pursued a formal education. Her husband was educated through sixth standard, and Khazran said she used to feel inadequate and inferior around more educated people. She joined Noor Jahan at COVA in 1997, working specifically on the Indian Population Project. Khazran taught local women about hygiene and prenatal care, including family planning. As she worked in the community and began to hold awareness programs, Khazran became more confident and assertive. In this instance, the NGO's work directly supported girls' education, but the employment and skill-building opportunities it provided to women also increased their confidence and self-efficacy.

Although women in Old City Hyderabad face barriers to higher education, the proliferation of socially-oriented NGOs increases opportunities and standard of living for many women in the community. The NGOs provide valuable services to the community, including health care, awareness of available legal resources, education, and counseling, among others. Ideologically, NGOs encourage individuals to assert themselves politically and provide opportunities for

employment and personal empowerment for their employees. Women-based NGOs also provide an opportunity to influence their communities through relationship-building and cooperative counseling. By employing more traditionally feminine solutions to local problems, such as counseling and providing maternal health services, women can create positive change with relatively little backlash from conservatives in the community. Therefore, I assert that social NGOs act as an intergenerational force for social change, including increased educational and occupational opportunities for women, in Hyderabad.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Motherhood, Sacrifice, and Intergenerational Inertia**

The high cultural expectations of mothers in India can place an undue burden on women to deny themselves opportunities in favor of their children. Nevertheless, the same mechanism can be an intergenerational force for social change in communities. Through personal sacrifice and encouragement, parents (particularly mothers) enable their children to achieve more material and/or social success than they did themselves. Many women in the Old City who did not complete twelfth standard wished for their children to pursue higher education in universities or professional schools, and the mothers I met expressed ambitions for their children's future, including for their daughters. Additionally, many women maintained that they were strong advocates for their children's education, sometimes over the objection of husbands or fathers. The sacrifices of these women increased their daughters' participation in formal education in the Old City.

Anthropological literature on girls' education in India notes the delicate balance families strike between increasing their daughters' earning potential and increasing their marriageability when they decide how much formal education to allow. For example, Peggy Froerer studied rural tribal girls' educational aspirations and opportunities in Chhattisgarh, in central India (2012). Froerer regards education as an important form of cultural capital, stating:

Bourdieu (1984) views cultural capital as a commodity that can be gradually accumulated and exchanged for economic capital. This commodity traditionally takes the form of education, while the economic capital is the job that awaits at the end. Schooling thus



represented a place where hard work could be transformed into certificates, which, in turn, could be translated into a better livelihood and future (Froerer 2012: 348).

Froerer notes that marriageability remains important for girls in rural India and is a form of cultural capital. When the girls had too little education (regarded by Froerer's informants as less than fifth class), their marriageability was low, but highly educated girls (above a fifth class education) were also seen as undesirable and impractical as daughters-in-law. Thus, education as cultural and translatable economic capital is not necessarily sufficient to increase a girl's social standing in her community. This complicates development narratives that imagine greater educational opportunities will yield higher status and increase interest in pursuing such opportunities. Cultural ideals and attitudes about women's roles in everyday life strongly affect their educational opportunities, and parents' attitudes and encouragement can actively reinforce or reshape children's long-term goals.

The cultural ideal of the selfless mother who unconditionally loves her children and does her utmost to help them succeed has been located cross-culturally in various settings. For example, one researcher found that among 51 children in the Mixteca region of Mexico, mothers' migrations to the United States increased children's drive to succeed academically (Dreby and Stutz 2012). The children viewed their mothers' hard work as a sacrifice for their benefit, and they felt compelled to repay their mothers by increasing their socioeconomic status through education and academic excellence. Over generations, such commitment can influence a family's social mobility.

The 29 married women I spoke with had children of various ages. In fact, through interviews and casual conversations, the idea that all women must marry and raise children (fulfilling their ideal role) was strongly stated. (For example, Sadaf expressed great joy when she

described her experience of successfully bearing a child after several years of trying. Ayesha, who was translating for me, smiled and described it as a “miracle.”) The cultural script was clear: girls pursue education (but not too much), then they marry and begin a family. While women can, and some did, return to their studies after marriage, marriage and the birth of a child were still the most important milestones in a woman’s social life. By becoming a mother, a woman joins the ranks of a group that, while hardly exclusive, exhibits a different set of social norms than women without children.

My interlocutors understood the pressures placed on mothers to raise their children properly. In cases where their husbands migrated to other cities or countries for work, the women gained particular prominence in the private sphere. The dedication associated with mothering was expressed through various avenues, such as the demanding housework duties women fulfilled in addition to their paid work. One example that stood out was of a friend’s mother who worked tirelessly for her family. When I was invited to their home to celebrate Eid (a major Muslim holiday), nearly all the members of the family wore their fanciest clothes and styled their hair and makeup for the occasion. My friend’s mother, however, wore ordinary cotton clothes and spent the day cooking for relatives and caring for everyone rather than enhancing her own appearance. Even on a holiday, she was busy taking care of her children and relatives. Since her husband works in the Gulf as a clothing designer, she managed her household, including four children, with abundant energy and independence. Her personal sacrifice enabled her children to pursue advanced education without the pressure to contribute to the family’s income.

When I asked Noor Jahan why she worked with COVA on women’s empowerment programs, she emphasized women’s central role in the family. Although men are considered the leaders of their families, Noor Jahan asserted that families and communities rely on women’s labor

to function. Noor Jahan believes this role presented women with a unique opportunity to influence their families and neighbors and create a more peaceful and just community. She said (through Ayesha's translation):

It was like that, that if a woman was empowered, if any riots are there, if her son will go and involve in [those] riots, so she was affected if he was harmed in those riots. Or if her husband was off work, or anything else, then only a woman will be affected with that. Even if he die[s] in riots or anything else, then also the woman will [be affected.] With anything [the mother] was affected like that, so they started thinking if we empowered the woman on everything, so they will empower the children, they will teach them everything, children and husband and community and neighbors and everyone, automatically, it will become communal harmony. This was the thinking process. When women are peaceful, and when they are aware of everything, then her house will be saved, even her community, even her city also. So they think like that (Interview: July 2, 2014).

Women, particularly mothers, are pillars of their families and communities. While men do not always recognize the women's importance in maintaining the family unit and community, it is women's incapacitation that disrupts household function most substantially. One might reasonably compare women's role in the household and community to air – it is vital to a healthy community, but it generally goes unnoticed until its absence is felt acutely.

I have provided general examples of how mothers often sacrifice for their children in everyday life. Now I will focus on how mothers' sacrifices and ambitions for their children factor into their children's educational and occupational opportunities. My sample consisted of women

who noted their own struggles with raising families, managing finances, and working with NGOs. Still, they spoke of their children with pride and hope for their future.

Sometimes, the women felt overwhelmed by the social obstacles and lack of support they experienced with regard to their children's education. Many of their husbands did not help their children with homework or paying school fees. This left women with responsibility for ensuring their children's education. When I asked Ayesha whether her parents wanted all their children to be educated, she said, "My father, not that much. He didn't say anything. If [her mother sent the children to school], it's ok. If she does not send, that's ok for him. Because he don't take care of that. There were fights with family members, everyone, and she encourages us always" (Interview: August 8, 2014). Similarly, when I interviewed Saida, Ayesha explained:

Ayesha: Actually, she supports [her children] a lot. Her husband [doesn't] know in which class they are studying, what [grades] they are getting, what they are doing, he don't know. He did not take any kind of responsibility.

Me: So he does not stop her, but not really help her?

Ayesha: Yes, of course. Yes...Actually, she supports herself. If anything wrong will happen in her life, she takes it so positively (Interview: July 8, 2014).

Many women spoke of their responsibility to encourage children to study and work hard. Shameem invited me into the home she shared with her husband and six-year-old daughter who attended a private primary school. In the main room of the house, piles of books lay beside and beneath the bed, and a small blackboard with writing hung on the wall next to a table with basic addition and multiplication tables. Shameem produced a stack of six thin, orange-covered notebooks from

beneath the bed and proudly presented them to me. The notebooks were filled with Telugu letters and neatly written English sentences with various parts of speech underlined. Shameem was very proud of her daughter's performance in school, and although she did not have extensive plans in mind for her daughter's future, Shameem was hopeful for her daughter's future educational success.

In addition to the energy and emotional resources mothers invested in their children's education, their material sacrifices enabled their children to pursue educational opportunities. Fatima's mother chose to live in a small house with few luxuries so she could fund her children's higher education for engineering and medical school. Fatima told me that her family might have been able to afford a larger house, but first they focused on paying the children's school fees. Her brother studied petroleum engineering at a university in Hyderabad, and Fatima planned to enter medical school and become a doctor. Fatima's twin sisters studied Arabic in a *madrassa*, and their mother hoped they could teach Arabic in a university one day. The mischievous girls had demonstrated quite an aptitude for religious studies that might translate into both economic capital (through earnings as Arabic professors) and social capital (through prestige in the Muslim community due to their command of Islamic texts.)

Parents who forgo material comfort and pleasures to provide for their education have become a kind of cultural motif in India and was expressed in the 2011 Bollywood hit *3 Idiots*. With some tongue-in-cheek humor, the film presents average Indian parents as obsessed with their children's chances of attending a top engineering school – so obsessed that one couple gave their son the only air conditioning unit in the house so he could study in comfort, while another mother lamented her husband's poor health condition. (The mother had prioritized her son's school fees over medical care in the hope that an engineer's salary could increase her family's social mobility.)

The film's most poignant moments critique the intense pressure on Indian students to succeed academically and increase their families' socioeconomic status. Parents invested in and sacrificed for their children, and in return the children were held to high standards of academic achievement in hopes of increasing future earning potential.

The mothers I spoke with did not push their children to the extremes portrayed in *3 Idiots*, but they did encourage their children to work hard and earn placement in competitive medical, pharmaceutical, and engineering programs. Many of my informants had very young children in primary school, and they had not yet planned the full extent of the children's education. Others had children in intermediate school, as well as pharmaceutical school and engineering college. They expressed pride at their children's academic accomplishments and set goals for their future. Since Hyderabad is a large city with many educational institutions, teenagers attended universities or professional schools nearby and lived with their families in the Old City. They spent much of their time on schoolwork and helping their mothers manage the household. Of the children I spoke with, most seemed to enjoy school, and a few had ambitions for schooling beyond tenth standard.

Women feel constrained and stressed by their maternal responsibilities, but their personal sacrifices enable their children to gain more or better quality education. By prioritizing their children's school and tutoring fees over their own material situation, mothers in Old City Hyderabad give their children the ability to pursue educational opportunities that they could not. Therefore, the cultural role of the selfless mother acted as an impetus for social change and created more opportunities for girls to pursue higher education in the community.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Alternate Interpretations of Islamic Texts and Practice**

Islam is a substantial force in the lives of my informants. In fact, Fatima and Ayesha specifically refer to Islam as a way of life or “the right way to live.” They cite Islamic prescriptions for eating food, washing, and conducting everyday tasks. Here I discuss the ways my informants negotiated their status within the family and the larger Muslim community. They present arguments against domestic violence and for women’s rights to education, economic opportunities, and dignity that utilized Quranic passages to persuade the Muslim men in their community. I also discuss how adherence to religious and social norms in the community enable women to pursue educational and occupational opportunities that may otherwise be denied them by the authority figures in their families. I tie the debate about women in Islam to the issue of girls’ education and the ways in which Islamic thought and educational opportunities can be mutually reinforced.

As an anti-domestic violence organization, My Choices takes a strong stance against traditional interpretations of the Quran that might seem to support violence against female. However, the women of My Choices did not voice any complaints about Islamic texts or practices; rather, they argued that certain men abused their power. In response, they enjoined devout Muslim men to respect their wives and community members. This view was stated in a My Choices pamphlet that provided information about domestic violence, sexual assault, and women’s rights under the law. The pamphlet reads:

Muslim women need to improve their knowledge of their own faith, and then reclaim their right to define themselves in the light of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, instead of by

customary practices, traditions, and extremist viewpoints...Community members should be encouraged to obtain professional training and degrees in counseling. The community is responsible to develop groups or organizations for handling problems of domestic violence, network with existing Muslim and non-Muslim agencies that can provide training or referrals, and set up safe houses for battered women and children. The Imams and other local leaders should be educated and utilized to end violence.

The holy Qur'an contains tens of verses extolling good treatment of women. Several specifically enjoin kindness to women (2:229-237; 4:19; 4:25). Added to these verses is the inescapable fact that the Prophet vehemently disapproved of men hitting their wives, and that he never in his entire life hit any woman or child. In the Prophet's last sermon, he exhorted men to 'be kind to women – you have rights over your wives, and they have rights over you.' He also said, 'Treat your women well, and be kind to them, for they are your partners and committed helpers,' and at a different time, he said, 'The strong man is not the one who can use the force of physical strength, but the one who controls his anger' (Bukhari).

The most abused verse is ayah 34 of Surah four: 'Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah gave more to the one than the other, and because they support them from their means. So devout women are extremely careful and attentive in guarding what cannot be seen in that which Allah is extremely careful and attentive in guarding. Concerning women whose dis-loyalty and ill-conduct (nushooz) you fear, admonish them, then refuse to share their beds, then hit them (lightly); but if they become obedient, do not



seek means of annoyance against them. For Allah is Most High, Great.’ This translation charges men with the task of financially and physically protecting and caring for their wives and families, since Allah has made men physically stronger than women, which is the interpretation of most scholars. Women, in return for that care, should be careful in guarding their fidelity and morality at all times when no one can see them in obedience to Allah. Instructions are then given regarding women who rebelliously ignore Allah’s commands about sexual fidelity and become sexually disloyal to their husbands.

The husband is instructed first to admonish his wife (talk to her), and then to refuse to share her bed. Should those measures fail, the last instruction is often translated as ‘hit her,’ (or ‘lightly tap her,’ when the Sunnah of the Prophet is considered). Some translators assert that it is incorrect to translate the word ‘hit’ at all, based on the Prophet’s lifelong hatred of hitting women, seen in his statement, ‘Never hit the handmaids of Allah.’

Although domestic violence is not the topic of my thesis, I include this lengthy quotation from the English-language pamphlet to illustrate one example of an approach to social change in Old City Hyderabad that affects women’s opportunities. This approach seeks to change attitudes toward women by working within existing status and power structures. (For example, Riffat Hassan stated, “It is extremely important for Muslim women activists to realize that in the contemporary Muslim world, laws instituted in the name of Islam cannot be overturned by means of political action alone, but through the use of better religious arguments.” [2001])

Many global aspects of Islam aim to ensure the authenticity and continuity of the Holy Quran and associated texts. For example, Muslims are implored to read the Quran in classical

Arabic to prevent the confusion of translation into various languages that plagued other religions, including Christianity.<sup>23</sup> While colloquial Arabic is often written without short vowel markers, Quranic verses are fully marked with vowels that influence the spelling and grammar of the words. The idea behind the Quran's strict and enduring syntax is to preserve the message for multiple generations without ambiguity. Because of this structure, similar interpretations of the text have held sway for centuries, and influential Muslim leaders throughout history have maintained conservative views of the Quran. Nevertheless, reformist movements have dotted the history of Islam, and some modern reformist Muslims interpret the text in a more egalitarian perspective.

In "Women, Islam, and Patriarchalism," Ghada Kharmi describes the development of gender-based critiques of the Quran through time. Karmi explains that the Quran is both a legal and a spiritual document:

From this point of view, it is possible to discern that the Qur'an is really not one document but two. The first deals with social and practical questions and may be understood as a specific response to the contemporary socio-political situation. It is legalistic and regulatory in content.

The second is concerned with universal spiritual, moral and philosophical issues. It is this which embodies the eternal message of Islam. As a result, undue emphasis on the legislative aspect of Islam is to lose sight of its spiritual content...Of the Qur'an's 6000

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<sup>23</sup> Not all Muslims know how to read Arabic, and many women I spoke with during my research could not read Arabic fluently enough to understand the Quranic text. In prayer gatherings I attended, one or two people who were fluent led prayers, and the others present repeated the words. Mastery of the Quran and Arabic language is praised by many informants and is a highly valued trait in the community. However, women who were not fluent in Arabic were able to follow along with prayers, since an Urdu translation was usually transmitted through speaking or literature.

verses, less than 700 deal with legislation and only 200 of these are directly concerned with regulation of social matters. The remainder are devoted to regulation of worship (81).

By treating the Quran as two documents in one, Kharmi separates the “essential” aspects of Islam, which she holds to be eternally true, and the legal aspect, which she argues is incompatible with gender egalitarianism.<sup>24</sup> With this strategy, Kharmi asserts that individuals can be “good” Muslims by following the spiritual prescriptions of the Quran while they work for a more egalitarian legal system.

Kharmi notes many examples of traditional interpretations of Quranic verses to answer the question of whether Islam is inherently patriarchal. She argues that without proper historical context, Quranic verses “contain contradictions and generate mixed messages for the reader”<sup>25</sup> (73). In defense of the Quran, and by extension Islam, many scholars have pointed out that some verses explicitly promote good relations between men and women (Afshar 1996), and the Quran guaranteed women the right to inherit property. Men and women are implored to fill all the standard duties of Muslims, including the pursuit of spiritual knowledge and the fulfillment of religious obligations such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca. Men were instructed to treat their wives kindly and cooperate with them in peaceful households.

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<sup>24</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I use the term “gender egalitarianism” to describe a system in which women and men share access to high-prestige positions within a community. I draw a distinction between such egalitarianism and the less specific term “gender equality.” The latter can apply to either an egalitarian system or a complementary one.

<sup>25</sup> Islam in the Middle East developed in a much different context than Islam in India. However, the idea of the overarching Islamic *umma*, or global religious community, is a powerful influence on Indian Muslims, and Muslim personal law regarding marriage, divorce, and custody is practiced as it is prescribed in the Quran. Contemporary Indian Muslims, many of whom are descendants of converts to Islam under Muslim rulers during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, do not share the exact context of early Islam, nor the evolution of Islamic legal thought of the Caliphate period.

Some Muslim feminist authors, such as Amina Wadud (2004) and Hadia Mubarak (2004), argued that the Quran endorsed complementarianism, a philosophy of gender equality in which men and women are assigned different roles with no real inequalities of status. Under this interpretation, Islam does not favor men over women but rather recognizes the biological and socialized differences between men and women and assigns them complementary roles to build strong families and societies. Many Muslim writers like Riffat Hassan continue to defend the Quran and basic tenets of Islam as just and righteous. She wrote:

God, who speaks through the Quran, is characterized by justice, and it is stated clearly in the Quran that God can never be guilty of ‘ulm’ (tyranny, oppression, or wrongdoing). Hence, the Quran, as God's Word, cannot be made the source of human injustice, and the injustice to which Muslim women have been subjected cannot be regarded as God-derived. The goal of Quranic Islam is to establish peace which can only exist within a just environment (Hassan 2001).

This interpretation of the Quran is guided by belief, aspirations, and a harmonious understanding of the Quran that was intended to guide and benefit both men and women.

However, Kharmi argues that certain Quranic verses clearly establish the superiority of men over women. For example, verse 4:34 is translated, “God has made the one to excel over the other.” Men are openly favored in matters of marriage, divorce, and child custody, and women’s testimony in court is not equal to men’s. The latter part of verse 4:34, which has become a major point of debate between various Muslim leaders, is often translated to English as, “Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God’s guarding. And those you fear may be

rebellious, admonish them; banish them to their couches and beat them. If they obey you, look not for any way against them.” (This is the same verse that was referenced and re-interpreted in the My Choices pamphlet.) Supporters of this interpretation argue that the meaning is quite clear – God believed that men should hit disobedient female relatives.

In order to portray Islamic texts as inherently beneficial to women, some interpreters of the Quran provide alternate translations that change key words in that particular verse, among others. Feminists in the Muslim world follow diverse branches of thought, but a substantial divide has developed between those who believe that the central tenets of Islam, including the Quran and *hadiths*, can guarantee gender equality, and those who believe that Islam is inherently oppressive to women. (I did not meet any women in Hyderabad who openly ascribed to the latter ideal. However, there are women throughout India who speak out against Islam and condemn Islamic practices and ideas. It is a potentially risky endeavor, since laws in India prohibit speech that offends religious sensibilities. There is also the risk of social ostracism for individuals who convert to another religion or give up their families’ religious practice. Certainly, women follow Islamic practice for different reasons, and their personal perspectives on Islam vary.)

Reinterpreting religious texts is only one of the ways my informants negotiate their everyday lives and increase their status and opportunities. Within the Muslim community of the Old City, adherence (or at least, the visible trappings of adherence, such as clothing and performing formal prayers five times each day) to Islamic practices in everyday life increases individual’s social status by providing him or her with a reputation as a “good Muslim.” Therefore, to garner the amount of social capital required to sustain local social change, activists emphasized the links between their actions and Quranic verses or localized Islamic practices. Criteria that contributed to the image of a certain woman as a “good Muslim” included:

1. Modest dress in the presence of non-relatives. (For women in the Old City, this usually took the form of a *burka*, or large outer-robe, headscarf, and face veil. The youngest girls I spoke with who regularly wore the *burka* were fifteen years old. I asked a few women at which age girls begin to wear the *burka* every time they interact with strangers, and the answers were quite vague. Fatima, for example, viewed wearing the *burka* as a highly personal and contextual decision that should not be strictly imposed on others.)
2. Observation of *namaz*. Muslims, both male and female, were expected to conduct formal prayers, or *namaz*, each day oriented toward Mecca. Working or busy women varied the timing of their prayers around their responsibilities.
3. Observation of the fast during Ramadan. Exceptions were made for elderly, sick, and menstruating women, but all others were supposed to fast from sunrise until sunset as a way of growing stronger in their faith.
4. Effort to learn Arabic and memorize the Quran. Memorizing the entire Quran was quite an intellectual challenge, and those who succeeded were respected in the community. However, not everyone could devote their time to memorizing the entire text. The striving to learn and increase knowledge of the Quran throughout one's life was emphasized as a virtuous trait.

There are certainly more criteria, but these are the four that were most prominently displayed in Old City Hyderabad. While the women I encountered are generally devout in their faith and genuinely believe that Islam presents “the best way of living” (personal conversation, July 6,

2014), there is also an implicit understanding that religious practice is one way to measure the morality of an individual and, by extent, the morality of his or her actions.

Ayesha addressed this concept tangentially when she described Noor Jahan's marital relationship:

Her husband was always restrictive to her, saying what are you doing [working on social issues in the community], she did not listen to him, and she worked. [Her in-laws] were very conservative people. When [a newspaper published a photo of Noor Jahan speaking publicly], her husband came and threw it on her face, and said, 'you are in newspaper like that.' And she said, 'I am wearing *burka*, I am not naked! I'm not doing wrong work, I'm doing right work. I'm serving the community (Interview: July 2, 2014).

In the incident above, Noor Jahan was able to leverage her observance of cultural and religious norms to negate her perceived transgression of speaking out as a public figure in the community. Propriety and adherence to social norms helped women operate effectively in the community with less resistance and harassment than they would likely experience if they transgressed those social expectations.

Education, religion and gender roles can influence individuals' opportunities and life goals. Although most schools in the Old City are co-educational, many parents prefer to send their daughters to all-female private schools or *madrassas*, where they are assured of their proper Islamic behavior. When boys and girls share a classroom, they are expected to maintain good behavior and rarely fraternize outside of schoolwork. Finally, and most importantly, many Muslims note the Quran's emphasis on education and the acquisition of knowledge for both men

and women. When I asked women why they thought Islamic extremist groups used the language of Islam to ban education for girls, they told me they did not understand how such beliefs could be justified by Islamic texts. They also point out that women in the community who could read Arabic and recite long sections of the Quran were honored by their families and the community. To my informants, education of both the religious and secular varieties is encouraged, not forbidden, by Islam. Education is painted as a virtuous pursuit, and one befitting a proper Muslim woman who wants to improve herself and contribute to her community.

This project encapsulates the ways agency and social structure are interconnected. Rather than stepping completely outside the prevailing local interpretations of Islam, individuals worked with the existing structure to overcome barriers to education and increase opportunities for themselves and their children. My informants observed the behaviors required to become a good Muslim, but they asserted powerfully that girls should not be denied educational opportunities on account of their sex. By employing these strategies, the women are able to maintain enough credibility in the community and enough peace in their own households to advocate for women's causes outside the home. In this instance, I argue that women employ their agency to expand the existing social structure and make it more equitable to women, instead of refusing to participate in existing structures.

Muslim women's roles in Old City Hyderabad are closely linked to their everyday religious practice. Although many scholars have argued that Islamic texts preclude gender equality by endorsing a complementarian and fairly rigid view of gender roles, my informants did not view Islam as the source of gender inequality in the community. Instead, they resolved to employ Islamic texts and principles in service of social justice and equal opportunities for women, and



they promoted interpretations of Islam that removed gender inequality from the texts. In this way, reinterpretations of Islam served as a force for social change in the community.

# Conclusion

Education can influence an individual's life in many ways. It can provide an avenue for intellectual curiosity and upward mobility through access to skilled-labor jobs that are more stable and higher-paying than day labor. For poor families, educating children is an economic decision that affects not only the children, but also the family and community. While increased education does not automatically guarantee higher income and upward socioeconomic mobility, it does increase occupational opportunities and with a university or professional degree, individuals are able to pursue careers in more lucrative fields. My informants valued higher education as a gateway to future opportunities for a better life.

At the same time, the women I spoke with were acutely aware of the challenges they and their neighbors faced in pursuing higher education. Many families deemed tenth standard to be sufficient education for a daughter who would marry into another family and earn money for her in-laws. Poverty and pessimism about employment prospects contributed to parents' perception that higher education for their children would not yield a strong return on investment for the family. In some situations, the potential economic promise of higher earnings in the future is not enough for struggling families to commit their limited financial resources to a private education or evening tutoring for their children. However, these attitudes vary widely, and the women I spoke with presented optimistic visions of their children's future and their potential to earn wealth and increase the family's socioeconomic status over multiple generations.

Social norms and expectations of traditional gendered behavior are impediments to women pursuing higher education in the Old City. Marriage and child-rearing are essential aspects of my informants' lives and their identities, and despite their own ambitions for their children's education

and employment, arranging good marriages for their children is a priority. Although none of my informants indicated that they would curtail their children's opportunities, they understand that many parents in the Old City have more traditional values. To ensure a "proper match" between their daughters and potential suitors, many parents in the Old City forbid their daughters to study beyond tenth or twelfth standard, fearing that less-educated men would not be interested in marrying women with more formal education than they possess. Furthermore, although underage marriage is illegal in India, a substantial portion of women in the Old City are married before they reach the age of eighteen. They assume a host of new responsibilities upon marriage that prevent them from pursuing further formal education. Before marriage, young women require their fathers' permission to pursue their education and work. After marriage, women are expected to be obedient to their husbands. Husbands' skepticism and hostility toward women in public spaces impact their wives' ability to study or work outside the home after marriage. Local religious and political leaders also influence men's attitudes and sometimes warn them against (secular) higher education for women, suggesting that over-educated wives may be less obedient to their husbands. These social factors reflect deeply-rooted cultural attitudes about women's place in society.

Even with traditional expectations organized against them, my informants experienced a shift in the community's attitudes toward women's education over the last few decades, and they continually develop strategies to negotiate their status within the community. Instead of sending children to work, they noted, even poor families in Hyderabad are investing more in their children's education than in previous years, and more families are sending their daughters to institutions of higher education. I identified three forces that are important in understanding this change: the proliferation of social NGOs (particularly those focused on women's empowerment), mothers' material and emotional sacrifices to provide more opportunities for their children than

they had had, and alternate interpretations of Islamic texts and practices. These are a few of the most important factors that motivate young women to pursue further education, and they demonstrate the ways Muslim women in the Old City negotiate their status within the family and the community.

I argue that my informants' negotiation of power within the family (particularly regarding daughters' educational aspirations) is recreated within the community. Mothers' advocacy for their children's opportunities is not a recent phenomenon – many of my informants were able to pursue higher education through their mothers' and grandmothers' sacrifices. As the chief advocates in their families for their children's education, women learned strategies to convince their husbands and in-laws to formally educate their children. Many women were able to apply the negotiation skills they learned at home to the public sphere. For example, the rise of social NGOs in Hyderabad enabled women to network with each other, generate a public discourse about women's status in the community, and develop strategies for women to assert themselves in the public sphere. Through these NGOs, women publicly discussed affairs that had long been considered private, such as domestic violence and family decisions about education and employment. By bringing personal issues into the public sphere, women were able to draw on additional support networks outside of family and gain the confidence to further advocate for themselves and the girls of their community. Powerful personalities like Noor Jahan and Saida encourage local women to develop their potential through education and work in social NGOs. As Ayesha said of Noor Jahan, "She always thinks, 'why should I stay in this kind of situation, I can do anything I want to do'...she always thinks that she wants to make a change in the community, for the women that want to do something, to empower them, and she wants to work with them also" (Interview: July 2, 2014).

Islamic rhetoric is both an advantage and disadvantage for Muslim women in Old City Hyderabad, and attitudes regarding women's rights in Islam vary throughout the community. Some local leaders in the community claim that secular education and employment outside the home makes young women disrespectful and disobedient. However, my informants do not view their faith as an impediment to accessing rights and opportunities in the Old City. Many informants assert that the Quran promotes education and self-improvement for both men and women, and My Choices promotional materials reflect the belief that the Quran condemns violence against women. Additionally, the importance of Islamic knowledge to living as a "good Muslim" enables women to accumulate social capital as they become teachers of the Quran and/or Arabic. Islamic belief and practice were important aspects of my informants' lives, but they were complicated by family and community power structures. Some women, such as the NGO workers I spoke with, used Islamic ideas and rhetoric to advocate for themselves and their children. This is another manifestation of the dichotomy between pessimistic views of poverty and optimism for future wealth and a higher standard of living – women negotiate existing social structures to increase their social and economic capital.

### **Future Directions**

To better understand the phenomena presented in my thesis, I plan to pursue further research into Muslim women's lives in Indian cities. After pursuing language training in Urdu, I plan to return to Hyderabad and conduct interviews and surveys with a more representative sample of women in the Old City. I will conduct multiple in-depth interviews with informants to better understand their lives and the role education can play in women's empowerment. After gathering

more representative data about women's education and employment in the Old City, I will compare the data from my fieldwork to ethnographic accounts of poor Hindu women in similar communities to see which challenges are religion-based and which are primarily class-based. I plan to examine the strategies women use to increase their social status in those communities and the ways they negotiate the various facets of their identities.

The social landscape of Hyderabad is continually changing, as my informants attested, and the lives of Hyderabadi people are changing with it. Further studies can track changes in social attitudes about girls' education over time through surveys and ethnographies. They can also assist in comparing changes in different areas of the city, which have historically been economically distinct.

Muslim women in Old City Hyderabad face challenges in pursuing higher education. After moving from Secunderabad, where "all families and women [were] empowered," to the Old City, Ayesha was dismayed at the restrictions placed on girls in the community and the comparative lack of support they had in pursuing their education. She was "shocked" to find a seventeen-year-old girl in her fourth standard class. However, she and other informants strongly assert that NGOs and individuals have brought about positive social change in the Old City. As she told me with a smile, "So now, it's changed. It's a lot of change. I've been this change, I've seen this change. And I'm a part of the change, actually!" (Interview: July 19, 2014)

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## **Figures**

Figure 1: Map of Hyderabad. The Church's First Stake in India. My Life in Zion, June 4 2012, accessed March 5 2015.

Figure 2: COVA Human Chain. Major Milestones, COVANetwork.org, accessed March 6 2015.